

MARTIN LUTHER
(1483-1546)

*An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation
Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*
(1520)

Translated by C. M. Jacobs (1915)

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American University of Beirut

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[Luther's Cover Letters]

**To the Esteemed and Reverend Master
NICHOLAS VON AMSDORF
Licentiate of Holy Scripture and Canon at Wittenberg,
my special and kind friend;
Doctor Martin Luther.**

The grace and peace of God be with thee, esteemed and reverend dear sir and friend.

The time to keep silence has passed and the time to speak is come, as Ecclesiastes says (Eccl 3:7). I have followed out our intention and brought together some matters touching the reform of the Christian Estate, to be laid before the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, in the hope that God may deign to help His Church through the efforts of the laity, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite indifferent. I am sending the whole thing to your Reverence, that you may pass judgment on it and, if necessary, improve it.

I know full well that I shall not escape the charge of presumption in that I, a despised monk, venture to address such high and great Estates on matters of such moment, and to give advice to people of such high intelligence. I shall offer no apologies, no matter who may chide me. Perchance I owe my God and the world another piece of folly, and I have now made up my mind honestly to pay that debt, if I can do so, and for once to become court jester; if I fail, I still have one advantage, – no one need buy me a cap or cut me my comb.¹ It is a question which one will put the bells on the other.² I must fulfill the proverb, “Whatever the world does, a monk must be it, even if he has to be painted in.” More than once a fool has spoken wisely, and wise men often have been arrant fools, as Paul says (1 Cor 3:18), “If any one will be wise, let him become a fool.” Moreover since I am not only a fool, but also a sworn doctor of Holy Scripture, I am glad for the chance to fulfill my doctor's oath in this fool's way.

I pray you, make my excuses to the moderately intelligent, for I know not how to earn the grace and favor of the immoderately intelligent, though I have often sought to do so with great pains. Henceforth I neither desire nor regard their favor. God help us to seek not our own glory, but His alone! Amen.

Wittenberg, in the house of the Augustinians,
on the Eve of St. John the Baptist (June 23d),
in the year fifteen hundred and twenty.

**To His Most Illustrious and Mighty Imperial Majesty,
and to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,
Doctor Martin Luther.**

Grace and power from God, Most Illustrious Majesty, and most gracious and dear Lords.

¹ An ironical comparison of the monks' cowl and tonsure with the headgear of the jester.

² i.e., Which one turns out to be the real fool.

It is not out of sheer forwardness or rashness that I, a single, poor man, have undertaken to address your worships. The distress and oppression which weigh down all the Estates of Christendom, especially of Germany, and which move not me alone, but everyone to cry out time and again, and to pray for help, have forced me even now to cry aloud that God may inspire some one with His Spirit to lend this suffering nation a helping hand. Oft-times the councils³ made some pretence at reformation, but their attempts have been cleverly hindered by the guile of certain men and things have gone from bad to worse. I now intend, by the help of God, to throw some light upon the wiles and wickedness of these men, to the end that when they are known, they may not henceforth be so hurtful and so great a hindrance. God has given us a noble youth to be our head and thereby has awakened great hopes of good in many hearts;⁴ wherefore it is meet that we should do our part and profitably use this time of grace.

In this whole matter the first and most important thing is that we take earnest heed not to enter on it trusting great might or in human reason, even though all power in the world were ours; for God cannot and will not suffer a good work to be begun with trust in our own power or reason. Such works He crushes ruthlessly to earth, as it is written in the thirty-third Psalm (Ps. 33:16), "There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength." On this account, I fear, it came to pass of old that the good Emperors Frederick I⁵ and II⁶ and many other German emperors were shamefully oppressed and trodden under foot by the popes, although all the world feared them. It may be that they relied on own might more than on God, and therefore they had to fall. In our own times, too, what was it that raised the bloodthirsty Julius II⁷ to such heights? Nothing else, I fear, except that France, the Germans and Venice relied upon themselves (Judges 20:21). The children of Benjamin slew 42,000 Israelites⁸ because the latter relied on their own strength.

That it may not so fare with us and our noble young Emperor Charles, we must be sure that in this matter we are dealing not with men, but with the princes of hell, who can fill the world with war and bloodshed, but whom war and bloodshed do not overcome. We must go at this work despairing of physical force and humbly trusting God; we must seek God's help with earnest prayer, and fix our minds on nothing else than the misery and distress of suffering Christendom, without regard to the deserts of evil men. Otherwise we may start the game with great prospect of success, but when we get well into it the evil spirits will stir up such confusion that the whole world will swim in blood, and yet nothing will come of it. Let us act wisely, therefore, and in the fear of God. The more force we use, the greater our disaster if we do not act humbly and in God's fear. The popes and the Romans have hitherto been able, by the devil's help, to set kings at odds with one another, and they may well be able to do it again, if we proceed by our own might and cunning, without God's help.

I. THE THREE WALLS OF THE ROMANISTS

The Romanists,⁹ with great adroitness, have built three walls about them, behind which they have hitherto defended themselves in such wise that no one has been able to reform them; and this has been the cause of terrible corruption throughout all Christendom.

First, when pressed by the temporal power, they have made decrees and said that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but, on the other hand, that the spiritual is above the temporal power. Second, when the attempt is made to reprove them out of the Scriptures, they raise the objection that the interpretation of the Scriptures belongs to no one except the pope. Third, if threatened with a council, they answer with the fable that no one can call a council but the pope.

³ Councils of the Church, especially those of Constance (1414-18), and of Basel (1431-39).

⁴ Charles V was elected Emperor in 1519, when but twenty years of age.

⁵ Frederick Barbarossa (1152-1190).

⁶ Frederick II (1212-1250), grandson of Barbarossa and last of the great Hohenstaufen Emperors. He died under excommunication.

⁷ Julius II (1503-1513). Notorious among the popes for his unscrupulous pursuit of political power, he was continually involved in war with one and another of the European powers over the possession of territories in Italy.

⁸ Luther's recollection of the figures was faulty.

⁹ The term "Romanist" is applied by Luther to the champions of the extreme form of papal supremacy.

In this wise they have slyly stolen from us our three rods¹⁰, that they may go unpunished, and have ensconced themselves within the safe stronghold of these three walls, that they may practice all the knavery and wickedness which we now see. Even when they have been compelled to hold a council they have weakened its power in advance by previously binding the princes with an oath to let them remain as they are. Moreover, they have given the pope full authority over all the decisions of the council, so that it is all one whether there are many councils or no councils – except that they deceive us with puppet-shows and sham-battles. So terribly do they fear for their skin in a really free council! And they have intimidated kings and princes by making them believe it would be an offence against God not to obey them in all these knavish, crafty deceptions.¹¹

Now God help us, and give us one of the trumpets with which the walls of Jericho were overthrown (Josh. 6:20), that we may blow down these walls of straw and paper, and may set free the Christian rods for the punishment of sin, bringing to light the craft and deceit of the devil, to the end that through punishment we may reform ourselves, and once more attain God's favor.

Against the first wall we will direct our first attack.

[First wall]

It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the 'spiritual estate'; princes, lords, artisans, and farmers the 'temporal estate'. That is indeed a fine bit of lying and hypocrisy. Yet no one should be frightened by it, and for this reason – viz., that all Christians are truly of the 'spiritual estate', and there is among them no difference at all but that of office, as Paul says in I Corinthians 12:12. We are all one body, yet every member has its own work, whereby it serves every other, all because we have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith, and are all alike Christians; for baptism, Gospel and faith alone make us 'spiritual' and a Christian people.

But that a pope or a bishop anoints, confers tonsures, ordains, consecrates, or prescribes dress unlike that of the laity – this may make hypocrites and graven images,¹² but it never makes a Christian or 'spiritual' man. Through baptism all of us are consecrated to the priesthood, as St. Peter says in I Peter 2:9, "Ye are a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom," and the book of Revelation says (Rev. 5:10) "Thou hast made us by thy blood to be priests and kings." For if we had no higher consecration than pope or bishop gives, the consecration by pope or bishop would never make a priest, nor might anyone either say mass or preach a sermon or give absolution. Therefore when the bishop consecrates it is the same thing as if he, in the place and stead of the whole congregation, all of whom have like power, were to take one out of their number and charge him to use this power for the others; just as though ten brothers, all king's sons and equal heirs, were to choose one of themselves to rule the inheritance for them all – they would all be kings and equal in power, though one of them would be charged with the duty of ruling.

To make it still clearer. If a little group of pious Christian laymen were taken captive and set down in a wilderness, and had among them no priest consecrated by a bishop, and if there in the wilderness they were to agree in choosing one of themselves, married or unmarried, and were to charge him with the office of baptizing, saying mass, absolving and preaching, such a man would be as truly a priest as though all bishops and popes had consecrated him. That is why in cases of necessity any one can baptize and give absolution,¹³ which would be impossible unless we were all priests. This great grace and power of baptism and of the Christian Estate they have well-nigh destroyed and caused us to forget through the canon law.¹⁴ It was in the manner aforesaid that Christians in olden days chose

¹⁰ i.e., the three rods for the punishment of an evil pope.

¹¹ literally "ghosts". The gist of the sentence is, "the Romanists have frightened the world with ghost-stories."

¹² *Oelgotze*, "an image anointed with holy oil to make it sacred"; in modern German, "a blockhead".

¹³ Lay-baptism in view of imminent death is a practice as old as the Christian Church. The right of the laity to administer baptism in such cases was expressly recognized by the Council of Elvira, in the year 306, and the decree of that Council became a part of the law of the Church. The right of the laity to give absolution in such cases rests on the principle that in the absence of the appointed official of the Church any Christian can do for any other Christian the things that are absolutely necessary for salvation, for "necessity knows no law".

¹⁴ The canon law, called by Luther throughout this treatise and elsewhere, the 'spiritual law', is a general name for the decrees of councils ('canons' in the strict sense) and decisions of the popes ('decretals' 'constitutions', etc.), promulgated by authority of the popes, and collected in the so-called *Corpus juris canonici*. It comprised the whole body of Church law, and embodied in legal forms the medieval theory of papal absolutism, which accounts for the bitterness with which Luther speaks of it, especially in this treatise. The Corpus includes the following collections of canons and decretals: the *Decretum*

from their number bishops and priests, who were afterwards confirmed by other bishops, without all the show which now obtains. It was thus that saints Augustine,¹⁵ Ambrose¹⁶ and Cyprian¹⁷ became bishops.

Since, then, the temporal authorities are baptized with the same baptism and have the same faith and Gospel as we, we must grant that they are priests and bishops, and count their office one which has a proper and a useful place in the Christian community. For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop and pope, though it is not seemly that every one should exercise the office. Nay, just because we are all in like manner priests, no one must put himself forward and undertake, without our consent and election, to do what is in the power of all of us. For what is common to all, no one dare take upon himself without the will and the command of the community; and should it happen that one chosen for such an office were deposed for malfeasance, he would then be just what he was before he held office. Therefore a priest in Christendom is nothing else than an office-holder. While he is in office, he has precedence; when deposed, he is a peasant or a townsman like the rest. Beyond all doubt, then, a priest is no longer a priest when he is deposed. But now they have invented *characteres indelebiles*,¹⁸ and prate that a deposed priest is nevertheless something different from a mere layman. They even dream that a priest can never become a layman, or be anything else than a priest. All this is mere talk and man-made law.

From all this it follows that there is really no difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, ‘spirituals’ and ‘temporals’, as they call them, except that of office and work, but not of ‘estate’; for they are all of the same estate¹⁹ – true priests, bishops and popes – though they are not all engaged in the same work, just as all priests and monks have not the same work. This is the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 12:4 and I Corinthians 12:12, and of St. Peter in I Peter 2:9, as I have said above, viz., that we are all one body of Christ, the Head, all members one of another. Christ has not two different bodies, one ‘temporal’, the other ‘spiritual’. He is one Head, and He has one body.

Therefore, just as those who are now called ‘spiritual’ – priests, bishops or popes – are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the Word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities – they bear sword and rod with which to punish the evil and to protect the good. A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and every one by means of his own work or office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another.

See, now, how Christian is the decree which says that the temporal power is not above the ‘spiritual estate’ and may not punish it.²⁰ That is as much as to say that the hand shall lend no aid when the eye is suffering. Is it not unnatural, not to say unchristian, that one member should not help another and

of Gratian (1142), the *Liber Extra* (1234), the *Liber Sextus* (1298), the *Constitutiones Clementinae* (1318 or 1317), and the two books of *Extravagantes* – the *Extravagantes* of John XXIV, and the *Extravagantes Communes*. The last pope whose decrees are included is Sixtus [or Sixtus] IV (died 1484).

¹⁵ Augustine, the master-theologian of the Ancient Church, bishop of Hippo in Africa from 395-430.

¹⁶ Ambrose, bishop of Milan from 374-397, had not yet been baptized at the time of his election to the episcopate, which was forced upon him by the unanimous voice of the people of the city.

¹⁷ Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, 247-258, is said to have consented to accept the office only when the congregation surrounded his house and besought him to yield to their entreaties.

¹⁸ The *character indelebilis*, or “indelible mark”, received authoritative statement in the bull *Exultate Deo* (1439). Eugenius IV, summing up the *Decrees of the Council of Florence*, says: “Among these sacraments there are three – baptism, confirmation, and orders – which indelibly impress upon the soul a character, i.e., a certain spiritual mark which distinguishes them from the rest.” The Council of Trent in its XXIII Session, July 15, 1563, defined the correct Roman teaching as follows: “Since in the sacrament of orders, as in baptism and confirmation, a character is impressed which cannot be destroyed or taken away, the Holy Synod justly condemns the opinion of those who assert that the priests of the New Testament have only temporary power, and that those once rightly ordained can again be made laymen, if they do not exercise the ministry of the Word of God.”

¹⁹ i.e., They are all Christians, among whom there can be no essential difference.

²⁰ The sharp distinction which the Roman Church drew between clergy and laity found practical application in the contention that the clergy should be exempt from the jurisdiction of the civil courts. This is the so-called *privilegium fori*, “benefit of clergy”. It was further claimed that the government of the clergy and the administration of Church property must be entirely in the hands of the Church authorities, and that no lay rulers might either make or enforce laws which in any way affected the Church.

prevent its destruction? Verily, the more honorable the member, the more should the others help. I say then, since the temporal power is ordained of God to punish evil-doers and to protect them that do well, it should therefore be left free to perform its office without hindrance through the whole body of Christendom without respect of persons, whether it affect pope, bishops, priests, monks, nuns or anybody else. For if the mere fact that the temporal power has a smaller place among the Christian offices than has the office of preachers or confessors, or of the clergy, then the tailors, cobblers, masons, carpenters, pot-boys, tapsters, farmers, and all the secular tradesmen, should also be prevented from providing pope, bishops, priests and monks with shoes, clothing, houses, meat and drink, and from paying them tribute. But if these laymen are allowed to do their work unhindered, what do the Roman scribes mean by their laws, with which they withdraw themselves from the jurisdiction of the temporal Christian power, only so that the may be free to do evil and to fulfill what St. Peter has said (2. Peter 2:1): “There shall be false teachers among you, and through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you.”

On this account the Christian temporal power should exercise its office without let or hindrance, regardless whether it be pope, bishop or priest whom it affects; whoever is guilty, let him suffer. All that the canon law has said to the contrary is sheer invention of Roman presumption. For Thus saith St. Paul to all Christians (Roman 13:1, 4): “Let every soul” – I take that to mean the pope’s soul also – “be subject unto the higher powers; for they bear not the sword in vain, but are the ministers of God for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.” St. Peter also says (1 Peter 2:13, 15): “Submit yourselves unto every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, for so is the will of God.” He has also prophesied that such men shall come as will despise the temporal authorities; and this has come to pass through the canon law.

So then, I think this first paper-wall is overthrown, since the temporal power has become a member of the body of Christendom, and is of the ‘spiritual estate’, though its work is of a temporal nature. Therefore its work should extend freely and without hindrance to all the members of the whole body; it should punish and use force whenever guilt deserves or necessity demands, without regard to pope, bishops and priests – let them hail threats and bans as much as they will.

That is why guilty priests, if they are surrendered to the temporal law,²¹ are first deprived of their priestly dignities, which would not be right unless the temporal sword had previously had authority over them by divine right.

Again, it is intolerable that in the canon law so much importance is attached to the freedom, life and property of the clergy, as though the laity were not also as spiritual and as good Christians as they, or did not belong to the Church. Why are your life and limb, your property and honor so free, and mine not? We are all alike Christians, and have baptism, faith, Spirit and all things alike. If a priest is killed, the land is laid under interdict²² – why not when a peasant is killed? Whence comes this great distinction between those who are equally Christians? Only from human laws and inventions!

Moreover, it can be no good spirit who has invented such exceptions and granted to sin such license and impunity. For if we are bound to strive against the works and words of the evil spirit, and to drive him out in whatever way we can, as Christ commands and His Apostles, ought we, then, to suffer it in silence when the pope or his satellites are bent on devilish words and works? Ought we for the sake of men to allow the suppression of divine commandments and truths which we have sworn in baptism to support with life and limb? Of a truth we should then have to answer all the souls that would thereby be abandoned and led astray.

It must therefore have been the very prince of devils who said what is written in the canon law: “If the pope were so scandalously bad as to lead souls in crowds to the devil, yet he could not be

²¹ It was the contention of the Church authorities that priests charged with infraction of the laws of the state first be tried in the ecclesiastical courts. If found guilty, they were degraded from the priesthood and handed over to the state authorities for punishment.

²² The interdict is the prohibition of the administration of the sacraments and of the other rites of the Church within the territory upon which the interdict is laid. Its use was not uncommon in the Middle Ages, and during the time that the power of the popes was at its height it proved an effective means of bringing refractory rulers to terms. A famous instance is the interdict laid upon the kingdom of England by Innocent III in 1208. Interdicts of more limited local extent were quite frequent. The use of the interdict as punishment for trifling infractions of church law was a subject of complaint at the diets of Worms (1521) and Nurnberg (1524).

deposed.”²³ On this accursed and devilish foundation they build at Rome, and think that we should let all the world go to the devil, rather than resist their knavery. If the fact that one man is set over others were sufficient reason why he should escape punishment, then no Christian could punish another, since Christ commands that every man shall esteem himself the lowliest and the least.

Where sin is, there is no escape from punishment; as St. Gregory²⁴ also writes that we are indeed all equal, but guilt puts us in subjection one to another. Now we see how they whom God and the Apostles have made subject to the temporal sword deal with Christendom, depriving it of its liberty by their own wickedness, without warrant of Scripture. It is to be feared that this is a game of Antichrist²⁵ or a sign that he is close at hand.

[Second wall]

The second wall is still more flimsy and worthless. They wish to be the only Masters of The Holy Scriptures,²⁶ even though in all their lives they learn nothing from them. They assume for themselves sole authority, and with insolent juggling of words they would persuade us that the pope, whether he be a bad man or a good man, cannot err in matters of faith,²⁷ and yet they cannot prove a single letter of it. Hence it comes that so many heretical and unchristian, nay, even unnatural ordinances have a place in the canon law, of which, however, there is no present need to speak. For since they think that the Holy Spirit never leaves them, be they never so unlearned and wicked, they make bold to decree whatever they will. And if it were true, where would be the need or use of Holy Scriptures? Let us burn them, and be satisfied with the unlearned lords at Rome, who are possessed of the Holy Spirit – although He can possess only pious hearts! Unless I had read it myself,²⁸ I could not have believed that the devil would make such clumsy pretensions at Rome, and find a following.

But not to fight them with mere words, we will quote the Scriptures. St. Paul says in I Corinthians 14:30: “If to anyone something better is revealed, though he be sitting and listening to another in God’s Word, then the first, who is speaking, shall hold his peace and give place.” What would be the use of this commandment, if we were only to believe him who does the talking or who has the highest seat? Christ also says in John 6:45, that all Christians shall be taught of God. Thus it may well happen that the pope and his followers are wicked men, and no true Christians, not taught of God, not having true understanding. On the other hand, an ordinary man may have true understanding; why then should we not follow him? Has not the pope erred many times? Who would help Christendom when the pope errs, if we were not to believe another, who had the Scriptures on his side, more than the pope?

Therefore it is a wickedly invented fable, and they cannot produce a letter in defence of it, that the interpretation of Scripture or the confirmation of its interpretation belongs to the pope alone. They have themselves usurped this power; and although they allege that this power was given to Peter when the keys were given to him, it is plain enough that the keys were not given to Peter alone, but to

²³ The statement of which Luther here complains is found in the *Decretum* of Gratian. In his *Epitome* Prierias had quoted this canon against Luther, as follows: “A *Pontifex indubitatus* (i.e., a pope who is not accused of heresy or schism) cannot lawfully be deposed or judged either by a council or by the whole world, even if he is so scandalous as to lead people with him by crowds into the possession of hell.” Luther’s comment is: “Be astonished, O heaven; shudder, O earth! Behold, O Christians, what Rome is!”

²⁴ Gregory the Great, pope 590-604.

²⁵ Antichrist, the incarnation of all that is hostile to Christ and His kingdom. His appearance is prophesied in 2 Thess. 2:3-10 (the “man of sin, sitting in the temple of God”), 1 John 2:18, 22:4:3, and Rev. 13. In the early Church the Fathers sometimes thought the prophecies fulfilled in the person of some especially pestilent heretic. Wyclif applied the term to the pope – “the pope would seem to be not the vicar of Christ, but the vicar of Antichrist”.

²⁶ According to academic usage, the holder of a Master’s degree was authorized to expound the subject named in the degree.

²⁷ The doctrine of papal infallibility was never officially sanctioned in the Middle Ages, but the claim of infallibility was repeatedly made by the champions of the more extreme view of papal power, e.g., Augustinus Triumphus (died 1328) in his *Summa de potestate Papae*. In his attack upon the Ninety-five Theses [of Luther, 1517] (*Dialogus de potestate Papae*, Dec., 1517) Prierias had asserted, “The supreme pontiff (i.e., the pope) cannot err when giving a decision as pontiff, i.e., speaking officially (*ex officio*), and doing what in him lies to learn the truth”; and again, “Whoever does not rest upon the teaching of the Roman Church and the supreme pontiff as an infallible rule of faith, from which even Holy Scripture draws its vigor and authority, is a heretic” (Erl. Ed., op. Var./ arg., I, 348). In the *Epitome* he had said: “Even though the pope as an individual can do wrong and hold a wrong faith, nevertheless as pope he cannot give a wrong decision” (Weimar Ed., VI, 337).

²⁸ Most recently in Prierias’s *Epitome*. See preceding note.

the whole community.²⁹ Moreover, the keys were not ordained for doctrine or government, but only for the binding and loosing of sin, and whatever further power of the keys they arrogate to themselves is mere invention. But Christ's word to Peter (Luke 22:32), "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not", cannot be applied to the pope, since the majority of the popes have been without faith, as they must themselves confess. Besides, it is not only for Peter that Christ prayed, but also for all Apostles and Christians, as he says in John 17:9, 20: "Father, I pray for those whom thou hast given me, and not for these only, but for all who believe on me through their word." Is not this clear enough?

Only think of it yourself! They must confess that there are pious Christians among us, who have the true faith, Spirit, understanding, word and mind of Christ. Why, then, should we reject their word and understanding and follow the pope, who has neither faith nor Spirit? That would be to deny the whole faith and the Christian Church. Moreover, it is not the pope alone who is always in the right, if the article of the Creed is correct: "I believe one holy Christian Church"; otherwise the prayer must run: "I believe in the pope at Rome," and so reduce the Christian Church to one man – which would be nothing else than a devilish and hellish error.

Besides, if we are all priests, as was said above, and all have one faith, one Gospel, one sacrament, why should we not also have the power to test and judge what is correct or incorrect in matters of faith? What becomes of the words of Paul in I Corinthians 2:15: "He that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man", and II Corinthians 4:13: "We have all the same Spirit of faith"? Why, then, should not we perceive what squares with faith and what does not, as well as does an unbelieving pope?

All these and many other texts should make us bold and free, and we should not allow the Spirit of liberty, as Paul calls Him, to be frightened off by the fabrications of the popes, but we ought to go boldly forward to test all that they do or leave undone, according to our interpretation of the Scriptures, which rests on faith, and compel them to follow not their own interpretation, but the one that is better. In the olden days Abraham had to listen to Sarah, although she was in more complete subjection to him than we are to anyone on earth. Balaam's ass, also, was wiser than the prophet himself. If God then spoke by an ass against a prophet, why should He not be able even now to speak by a righteous man against the pope? In like manner St. Paul rebukes St. Peter as a man in error. Therefore it behooves every Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to rebuke errors.

[Third wall]

The third wall falls of itself when the first two are down. For when the pope acts contrary to the Scriptures, it is our duty to stand by the Scriptures, to reprove him, and to constrain him, according to the word of Christ in Matthew 18:15: "If thy brother sin against thee, go and tell it him between thee and him alone; if he hear thee not, then take with thee one or two more; if he hear them not, tell it to the Church; if he hear not the Church, consider him a heathen." Here every member is commanded to care for every other. How much rather should we do this when the member that does evil is a ruling member, and by his evil-doing is the cause of much harm and offense to the rest! But if I am to accuse him before the Church, I must bring the Church together.

They have no basis in Scripture for their contention that it belongs to the pope alone to call a council or confirm its actions;³⁰ for this is based merely upon their own laws, which are valid only in so far as they are not injurious to Christendom or contrary to the laws of God. When the pope deserves punishment, such laws go out of force, since it is injurious to Christendom not to punish him by means of a council.

Thus we read in Acts 15:6 that it was not St. Peter who called the Apostolic Council, but the Apostles and elders. If, then, that right had belonged to St. Peter alone, the council would not have been a

²⁹ Luther had discussed the whole subject of the power of the keys in the Latin treatise, *Resolutio super propositione xiii. De potestate papae*, of 1519 (Weimar Ed., II, pp. 185 ff.), and in the German treatise *The Papacy at Rome*.

³⁰ Another contention of Prierias. In 1518 (Nov. 28th) Luther had appealed his cause from the decision of the pope, which he foresaw would be adverse, to the decision of a council to be held at some future time. In the *Epitome* Prierias discusses this appeal, asserting, among other things, that "when there is one undisputed pontiff, it belongs to him alone to call a council", and that "the decrees of councils neither bind nor hold (*nullum ligant vel astringunt*) unless they are confirmed by authority of the Roman pontiff" (Weimar Ed., VI, 335).

Christian council, but an heretical *conciliabulum*.³¹ Even the Council of Nicaea – the most famous of all – was neither called nor confirmed by the Bishop of Rome, but by the Emperor Constantine,³² and many other emperors after him did the like, yet these councils were the most Christian of all.³³ But if the pope alone had the right to call councils, then all these councils must have been heretical. Moreover, if I consider the councils which the pope has created, I find that they have done nothing of special importance.

Therefore, when necessity demands, and the pope is an offense to Christendom, the first man who is able should, as a faithful member of the whole body, do what he can to bring about a truly free council.³⁴ No one can do this so well as the temporal authorities, especially since now they also are fellow-Christians, fellow-priests, ‘fellow-spirituals’,³⁵ fellow-lords over all things, and whenever it is needful or profitable, they should give free course to office and work in which God has put them above every man. Would it not be an unnatural thing, if a fire broke out in a city, and everybody were to stand by and it burn on and on and consume everything that could burn, for the sole reason that nobody had the authority of the burgomaster, or because, perhaps, the fire broke in the burgomaster’s house? In such case is it not the duty of every citizen to arouse and call the rest? How much more should this be done in the spiritual city of Christ, if a fire of offense breaks out, whether in the papal government, or anywhere else? In the same way, if the enemy attacks a city, he who first rouses the others deserves honor and thanks; why then should he not deserve honor who makes known the presence of the enemy from hell, awakens the Christians, and calls them together?

But all their boasts of an authority which dare not be opposed amount to nothing after all. No one in Christendom has authority to do injury, or to forbid the resisting of injury. There is no authority in the Church save edification. Therefore, if the pope were to use his authority to prevent the calling of a free council, and thus became a hindrance to the edification of the Church, we should have regard neither for him nor for his authority; and if he were to hurl his bans and thunderbolts, we should despise his conduct as that of a madman, and relying on God, hurl back the ban on him, and coerce him as best we could. For this presumptuous authority of his is nothing; he has no such authority, and he is quickly overthrown by a text of Scripture; for Paul says to the Corinthians (II Corinthians 10:8): “God has given us authority not for the destruction, but for the edification of Christendom.” Who is ready to overlap this text? It is only the power of the devil and of Antichrist which resists the things that serve for the edification of Christendom; it is, therefore, in no wise to be obeyed, but is to be opposed with life and goods and all our strength.

Even though a miracle were to be done in the pope’s behalf against the temporal powers, or though someone were to be stricken with a plague – which they boast has sometimes happened – it should be considered only the work of the devil, because of the weakness of our faith in God. Christ Himself prophesied in Matthew 24:24: “There shall come in my name false Christs and false prophets, and do signs and wonders, so as to deceive even the elect,” and Paul says in II Thessalonians 2:9, that Antichrist shall, through the power of Satan, be mighty in lying wonders.

Let us, therefore, hold fast to this: No Christian authority can do anything against Christ; as St. Paul says (II Corinthians 13:8): “We can do nothing against Christ, but for Christ.” Whatever does aught against Christ is the power of Antichrist and of the devil, even though it were to rain and hail wonders and plagues. Wonders and plagues prove nothing, especially in these last evil times, for which all the Scriptures prophesy false wonders. Therefore we must cling with firm faith to the words of God, and then the devil will cease from wonders.

Thus I hope that the false, lying terror with which the Romans have this long time made our conscience timid and stupid, has been allayed. They, like all of us, are subject to the temporal sword; they have no power to interpret the Scriptures by mere authority, without learning; they have no authority to prevent a council or, in sheer wantonness, to pledge it, bind it, or take away its liberty;

³¹ i.e., a mere gathering of people.

³² The council of Nicaea, the first of the great councils of the Church, assembled in 325 for the settlement of the Arian controversy. Luther’s statement that it was called by the Emperor Constantine, and that its decisions did not derive their validity from any papal confirmation, is historically correct.

³³ Luther is here referring to the earlier so-called “ecumenical” councils.

³⁴ i.e., a council which will not be subject to the pope.

³⁵ i.e., they belong to the ‘spiritual estate’; see above.

but if they do this, they are in truth the communion of Antichrist and of the devil, and have nothing at all of Christ except the name.

II. ABUSES TO BE DISCUSSED IN COUNCILS

We shall now look at the matters which should be discussed in the councils, and with which popes, cardinals, bishops and all the scholars ought properly to be occupied day and night if they loved Christ and His Church. But if they neglect this duty, then let the laity³⁶ and the temporal authorities see to it, regardless of bans and thunders; for an unjust ban is better than ten just releases, and an unjust release worse than ten just bans. Let us, therefore, awake, dear Germans, and fear God rather than men, that we may not share the fate of all the poor souls who are so lamentably lost through the shameful and devilish rule of the Romans, in which the devil daily takes a larger and larger place – if, indeed, it were possible that such a hellish rule could grow worse, a thing I can neither conceive nor believe.

1. It is a horrible and frightful thing that the ruler of Christendom, who boasts himself vicar of Christ and successor of St. Peter, lives in such worldly splendor that in this regard no king nor emperor can equal or approach him, and that he who claims the title of “most holy” and “most spiritual” is more worldly than the world itself. He wears a triple crown, when the greatest kings wear but a single crown;³⁷ if that is like the poverty of Christ and of St. Peter, then it is a new kind of likeness. When a word is said against it, they cry out “Heresy!” but that is because they do not wish to hear how unchristian and ungodly such a practice is. I think, however, that if the pope were with tears to pray to God, he would have to lay aside these crowns, for our God can suffer no pride; and his office is nothing else than this: daily to weep and pray for Christendom, and to set an example of all humility.

However that may be, this splendor of his is an offense, and the pope is bound on his soul’s salvation to lay it aside, because St. Paul says (I Thess. 5:21): “Abstain from all outward shows, which give offense,” and in Romans 12:17, “We should provide good, not only in the sight of God, but also in the sight of all men.” An ordinary bishop’s crown would be enough for the pope; he should be greater than others in wisdom and holiness, and leave the crown of pride to Antichrist, as did his predecessors several centuries ago. They say he is a lord of the world; that is a lie; for Christ, whose vicar and officer he boasts himself to be, said before Pilate (John 17:36), “My kingdom is not of this world”; and no vicar’s rule can go beyond his lord’s. Moreover he is not the vicar of the glorified, but of the crucified Christ, as Paul says (I Cor 2:2), “I was willing to know nothing among you save Christ, and him only as the Crucified”; and in Philippians 2:5, “So think of yourselves as ye see in Christ, who emptied himself and took upon him the appearance of a servant”; and again in I Corinthians 1:23, “We preach Christ, the Crucified.” Now they make the pope a vicar of the glorified Christ in heaven, and some of them have allowed the devil to rule them so completely that they have maintained that the pope is above the angels in heaven and has authority over them. These are indeed the very works of the very Antichrist.

2. What is the use in Christendom of those people who are called the cardinals? I shall tell you. Italy and Germany have many rich monasteries, foundations, benefices, and livings. No better way has been discovered to bring all these to Rome than by creating cardinals and giving them the bishoprics, monasteries and prelacies, and so overthrowing the worship of God. For this reason we now see Italy a very wilderness – monasteries in ruins, bishoprics devoured, the prelacies and the revenues of all the churches drawn to Rome, cities decayed, land and people laid waste, because there is no more worship or preaching. Why? The cardinals must have the income.³⁸ No Turk could have so devastated Italy and suppressed the worship of God.

³⁶ Christians considered *en masse*, without regard to official position in the Church.

³⁷ The papal crown dates from the eleventh century: the triple crown, or tiara, from the beginning of the fourteenth. It was intended to signify that very superiority of the pope to be rulers of this world, of which Luther here complains.

³⁸ The Cardinal della Rovere, afterwards Pope Julius II, held at one time the archbishopric of Avignon, the bishoprics of Bologna, Lausanne, Coutances, Viviers, Mende, Ostia and Velletri, and the abbacies of Nonantola, and Grottaferrata. This is but one illustration of the scandalous pluralism practiced by the cardinals.

Now that Italy is sucked dry, they come into Germany,³⁹ and begin oh, so gently. But let us beware, or Germany will soon become like Italy. Already we have some cardinals; what the Romans seek by that the “drunken Germans” are not to understand until we have not a bishopric, a monastery, a living, a benefice, a mite or a penny left. Antichrist must take the treasures of the earth, as it was prophesied. So it goes on. They skim the cream off the bishoprics, monasteries and benefices, and because they do not yet venture to turn them all to shameful use, as they have done in Italy, they only practice for the present the sacred trickery of coupling together ten or twenty prelacies and taking a yearly portion from each of them, so as to make a tidy sum after all. The priory of Würzburg yields a thousand gulden; that of Bamberg something more; Mainz, Trier and the others, something more; and so from one to ten thousand gulden might be got together, in order that a cardinal might live at Rome like a rich king.

“After they are used to this, we will create thirty or forty cardinals in a day,⁴⁰ and give to one Mount St. Michael at Bamberg⁴¹ and the bishopric of Würzburg to boot, hang on to these a few rich livings, until churches and cities are waste, and after that we will say, ‘We are Christ’s vicars and shepherds of Christ’s sheep; the mad, drunken Germans must put up with it.’”

I advise, however, that the number of the cardinals be reduced, or that the pope be made to keep them at his own expense. Twelve of them would be more than enough, and each of them might have an income of a thousand gulden a year.⁴² How comes it that we Germans must put up with such robbery and such extortion of our property, at the hands of the pope? If the Kingdom of France has prevented it,⁴³ why do we Germans let them make such fools and apes of us? It would all be more bearable if in this way they only stole our property; but they lay waste the churches and rob Christ’s sheep of their pious shepherds, and destroy the worship and the Word of God. Even if there were not a single cardinal, the Church would not go under. As it is they do nothing for the good of Christendom; they only wrangle about the incomes of bishoprics and prelacies, and that any robber could do.

3. If ninety-nine parts of the papal court⁴⁴ were done away and only the hundredth part allowed to remain, it would still be large enough to give decisions in matters of faith. Now, however, there is such a swarm of vermin yonder in Rome, all boasting that they are ‘papal’, that there was nothing like it in Babylon. There are more than three thousand papal secretaries alone; who will count the other offices, when they are so many that they scarcely can be counted? And they all lie in wait for the prebends and benefices of Germany as wolves lie in wait for the sheep. I believe that Germany now gives much more to the pope at Rome than it gave in former times to the emperors. Indeed, some estimate that every year more than three hundred thousand gulden find their way from Germany to Rome, quite uselessly and fruitlessly; we get nothing for it but scorn and contempt. And yet we wonder that princes, nobles, cities, endowments, land and people are impoverished! We should rather wonder that we still have anything to eat!

Since we here come to the heart of the matter, we will pause a little, and let it be seen that the Germans are not quite such gross fools as not to note or understand the sharp practices of the Romans. I do not now complain that at Rome God’s command and Christian law are despised; for such is the state of Christendom, and particularly of Rome, that we may not now complain of such high matters. Nor do I complain that natural or temporal law and reason count for nothing. The case is worse even than that. I complain that they do not keep their own self-devised canon law, though it is, to be sure, mere tyranny, avarice and temporal splendor, rather than law. Let us see!

³⁹ The complaint that the cardinals were provided with incomes by appointment to German benefices goes back to the Council of Constance (1415).

⁴⁰ The creation of new cardinals was a lucrative proceeding for the popes. On July 31, 1517, Leo X created thirty-one cardinals, and is said to have received from the new appointees about 300,000 ducats. Needless to say, the cardinals expected to make up the fees out of the income of their livings.

⁴¹ The famous Benedictine monastery just outside the city of Bamberg.

⁴² The proposal made at Constance (see footnotes 3 and 39 above) was more generous. It suggested a salary of three to four thousand gulden.

⁴³ As early as the fourteenth century both England and France had enacted laws prohibiting the very practices of which Luther here complains. It should be noted, however, that these laws were enforced only occasionally and never very strictly.

⁴⁴ The papal court or curia consisted of all the officials of various sorts who were employed in the transaction of papal business, including those who were in immediate attendance upon the person of the pope, the so-called “papal family”. In the sixteenth century reference is made to 949 offices, exclusive of those which had to do with the administration of the city of Rome and of the States of the Church, and not including the members of the pope’s “family”.

In former times German emperors and princes permitted the pope to receive the annates from all the benefices of the German nation, i.e., the half of the first year's revenues from each benefice.⁴⁵ This permission was given, however, in order that by means of these large sums of money, the pope might accumulate a treasure for fighting against the Turks and infidels in defense of Christendom, so that the burden of the war might not rest too heavily upon the nobility, but that the clergy also should contribute something toward it. This single-hearted devotion of the German nation the popes have so used, that they have received this money for more than a hundred years, have now made of it a binding tax and tribute, and have not only accumulated no treasure, but have used the money to endow many orders and offices at Rome, and to provide these offices with salaries, as though the annates were a fixed rent.

When they pretend that they are about to fight against the Turks, they send out emissaries to gather money. Oft-times they issue an indulgence on this same pretext of fighting the Turks, for they think the mad Germans are forever to remain utter and arrant fools, give them money without end, and satisfy their unspeakable greed; though we clearly see that not a mite of the annates or of the indulgence-money or of all the rest, is used against the Turks, but all of it goes into the bottomless bag. They lie and deceive, make laws and make agreements with us, and they do not intend to keep any of them. All this must be counted the work of Christ and St. Peter!

Now, in this matter the German nation, bishops and princes, should consider that they too are Christians, and should protect the people, whom they are set to rule and guard in things temporal and spiritual, against these ravening wolves who, in sheep's clothing, pretend to be shepherds and rulers; and, since the annates are so shamefully abused and the stipulated conditions are not fulfilled, they should not permit their land and people to be so sadly robbed and ruined, against all justice; but by a law of the emperor or of the whole nation, they should either keep the annates at home or else abolish them again.⁴⁶ For since the Romans do not keep the terms of the agreement, they have no right to the annates. Therefore the bishops and princes are bound to punish or prevent such thievery and robbery, as the law requires.

In this they should aid the pope and support him, for he is perchance too weak to prevent such an abuse all by himself; or if he were to undertake to defend and maintain this practice, they ought resist him and fight against him as against a wolf and a tyrant, for he has no authority to do or to defend evil. Moreover, if it were ever desired to accumulate such a treasure against the Turks, we ought in the future to have sense enough to see that the German nation would be a better custodian for it than the pope; for the German nation has people enough for the fighting, if only the money is forthcoming. It is with the annates as it has been with many another Roman pretense.

Again, the year has been so divided between the pope and the ruling bishops and canons,⁴⁷ that the pope has six months in the year – every other month – in which to bestow the benefices which fall vacant in his months.⁴⁸ In this way almost all the benefices are absorbed by Rome, especially the very best livings and dignities,⁴⁹ and when once they fall into the hands of Rome, they never come out of

⁴⁵ Early in their history, which dates from the beginning of the fourteenth century, the annates had become a fixed tax on all Church offices which fell vacant, and the complaint of extortion in their appraisal and collection was frequently raised. The Council of Constance restricted the obligation to bishoprics and abbeys, and such other benefices as had a yearly income of more than 24 gulden. The Council of Basel (1439) resolved to abolish them entirely, but the resolution of the Council was inoperative, and in the Concordat of Vienna (1448) the German nation agreed to abide by the decision of Constance.

⁴⁶ i.e., as was done by the Council of Basel (see previous footnote).

⁴⁷ The canons are the clergy attached to a cathedral church who constituted the "chapter" of that cathedral, and to whom the right to elect the bishop normally belonged.

⁴⁸ This whole section deals with the abuse of the "right of reservation", i.e., the alleged right of the pope to appoint directly to vacant church positions. According to papal theory the right of appointment belonged absolutely to the pope, who graciously yielded the right to others under certain circumstances, reserving it to himself in other cases. The practice of reserving the appointments seems to date from the twelfth century, and was originally an arbitrary exercise of papal authority. The rules which came to govern the reservation of appointments were regarded as limitations upon the authority of the pope. The rule of the "papal months", as it obtained in Germany in Luther's time, is found in the Concordat of Vienna of 1448 [see note 45]. It provides that livings, with the exception of the higher dignities in the cathedrals and the chief posts in the monasteries, which fall vacant in the months of February, April, June, August, October and December, shall be filled by the ordinary methods – elections, presentation, appointment by the bishop, etc. – but that vacancies occurring in the other months shall be filled by appointment of the pope.

⁴⁹ i.e., Church offices which carried with them certain rights of jurisdiction and gave their possessors a certain honorary precedence over other officials of the Church.

them again, though a vacancy may never again occur in the pope's month. Thus the canons are cheated. This is a genuine robbery, which intends to let nothing escape. Therefore it is high time that the "papal months" be altogether abolished, and that everything which they have brought to Rome be taken back again. For the princes and nobles should take measures that the stolen goods be returned, the thieves punished, and those who have abused privilege be deprived of privilege. If it is binding and valid when the pope on the day after his election makes, in his chancery, rules and laws whereby our foundations and livings are robbed – a thing which he has no right to do – then it should be still more valid if the Emperor Charles on the day after his coronation⁵⁰ were to make rules and laws that not another benefice or living in all Germany shall be allowed to come into the hands of Rome by means of the "papal months", and that the livings which have already fallen into its hands shall be released, and redeemed from the Roman robbers; for he has this right by virtue of his office and his sword.

But now the Roman See of Avarice and Robbery has not been able to await the time when all the benefices, one after another, would, by the "papal months", come into its power, but hastens, with insatiable appetite, to get possession of them all as speedily as possible; and so besides the annates and the "months" it has hit upon a device by which benefices and livings fall to Rome in three ways:

First, If any one who holds a free⁵¹ living dies at Rome or on the way to Rome, his living must forever belong to the Roman – I should rather say the robbing – See;⁵² and yet they will not be called robbers, though they are guilty of such robbery as no one has ever heard or read about.

Second, In case anyone who belongs to the household of the pope or of the cardinals⁵³ holds or takes over a benefice, or in case one who already holds a benefice afterwards enters the "household" of the pope or of a cardinal. But who can count the "household" of the pope and of the cardinals, when the pope, if he only goes on a pleasure-ride, takes with him three or four thousand mule-riders, eclipsing all emperors and kings? Christ and St. Peter went on foot in order that their vicars might have the more pomp and splendor. Now avarice has cleverly thought out another scheme, and brings it to pass that even here many have the name of "papal servant", just as though they were in Rome; all in order that in every place the mere rascally little word "papal servant" may bring all benefices to Rome and tie them fast there forever. Are not these vexatious and devilish inventions? Let us beware! Soon Mainz, Madgeburg and Halberstadt will gently pass into the hands of Rome, and the cardinalate will be paid for dearly enough.⁵⁴ "Afterwards we will make all the German bishops cardinal so that there will be nothing left outside."

Third, When a contest has started at Rome over a benefice.⁵⁵ This I hold to be almost the commonest and widest road for bringing livings to Rome. For when there is no contest at home, unnumbered knaves will be found at Rome to dig up contests out of the earth and assail livings at their will. Thus many a good priest has to lose his living, or settle the contest for a time by the payment of a sum of money. Such a living rightly or wrongly contested must also belong forever to the Roman See. It would be no wonder if God were to rain from heaven fire and brimstone and to sink Rome in the abyss, as He did Sodom and Gomorrah of old. Why should there be a pope in Christendom, if his power is used for nothing else than such archknavery, and if he protects and practises it? O noble princes and lords, how long will ye leave your lands and people naked to these ravening wolves!

Since even these practices were not enough, and Avarice grew impatient at the long time it took to get hold of all the bishoprics, therefore my Lord Avarice devised the fiction that the bishoprics should be nominally abroad, but that their land and soil should be at Rome, and no bishop can be confirmed

⁵⁰ Charles V, though elected emperor, was not crowned until October 22nd.

⁵¹ i.e., a living which has not hitherto been filled by papal appointment.

⁵² This rule, like that of the papal months", is found in the Concordat of Vienna.

⁵³ i.e., all those who were counted members of the "family" or "household" of the pope or of any of the cardinals. The term included those who were in immediate attendance upon the pope or the cardinals, and all those to whom, by virtue of any special connection with the curia, the name "papal servant" could be made to apply. These are the "courtesans" to whom Luther afterwards refers.

⁵⁴ In 1513 Albrecht of Brandenburg was made Archbishop of Madgeburg and later in the same year Administrator of Halberstadt; in 1514 he became Archbishop of Mainz as well. In 1518 he was made cardinal.

⁵⁵ This rule, like the others mentioned above, is contained in the Concordat of Vienna.

unless with a great sum of money he buy the *pallium*,⁵⁶ and bind himself with terrible oaths to the pope's servant.⁵⁷ This is the reason that no bishop ventures to act against the pope. That, too, is what the Romans were seeking when they imposed the oath, and thus the very richest bishoprics have fallen into debt and ruin. Mainz pays, as I hear, 20,000 gulden. These be your Romans! To be sure they decreed of old in the canon law that the *pallium* should be bestowed gratis, the number of papal servants diminished, the contest lessened, the chapters and bishops allowed their liberty. But this did not bring in money, and so they turned over a new leaf, and all authority was taken from the bishops and chapters⁵⁸; they are made ciphers, and have no office nor authority nor work, but everything is ruled by the archbishops at Rome; soon they will have in hand even the office of sexton and bell-ringer in all the churches. All contests are brought to Rome, and by authority of the pope everyone does as he likes.

What happened this very year? The Bishop of Strassburg wished to govern his chapter properly and to institute reforms in worship, and with this end in view made certain godly and Christian regulations. But my dear Lord Pope and the Holy Roman See, at the instigation of the priests, overthrew and altogether condemned this holy and spiritual ordinance. This is called "feeding the sheep of Christ!" Thus priests are to be encouraged against their own bishop, and their disobedience to divine law is to be protected! Antichrist himself, I hope, will not dare to put God to such open shame! There you have your pope after your own heart! Why did he do this? Ah! if one church were reformed, it would be a dangerous departure; Rome's turn too might come! Therefore it were better that no priest should be left at peace with another, that kings and princes should be set at odds, as has been the custom heretofore, and the world filled with the blood of Christians, only so the concord of Christians should not trouble the Holy Roman See with a reformation.

So far we have been getting an idea of how they deal with livings which become vacant. But for tender-hearted Avarice the vacancies are too few, and so he brings his foresight to bear upon the benefices which are still occupied by their incumbents, so that they must be unfilled, even they are not unfilled.⁵⁹ And this he does in many ways, as follows:

First, He lies in wait for fat prebends or bishoprics which are held by an old or a sick man, or by one with an alleged disability. To such an incumbent, without his desire or consent, the Holy See gives a *coadjutor*, i.e., an "assistant", for the coadjutor's benefit, because he is a "papal servant", or has paid for the position, or has earned it by some other ignoble service to Rome. In this case the rights of the chapter or the rights of him who has the bestowal of the living⁶⁰ must be surrendered, and the whole thing fall into the hands of Rome.

Second, There is a little word *commend*,⁶¹ by which the pope entrusts the keeping of a rich, fat monastery or church to a cardinal or to another of his people, just as though I were to give you a hundred gulden to keep. This is not called the giving or bestowing of the monastery nor even its destruction, or the abolition of the worship of God, but only "giving it into keeping"; not that he to whom it is entrusted is to care for it, or build it up, but he is to drive out the incumbent, to receive the goods and revenues, and to install some apostate, renegade monk,⁶² who accepts five

⁵⁶ The *pallium* is a woollen shoulder-cape which is the emblem of the archbishop's office, and which must be secured from Rome. The bestowal of the *pallium* by the pope is a very ancient custom. The canon law prescribes that the archbishop-elect must secure the *pallium* from Rome within three months of his election; otherwise he is forbidden to discharge any of the duties of his office. It is regarded as the necessary complement of his election and consecration, conferring the "plenitude of the pontifical office", and the name of archbishop. Luther's charge that it had to be purchased "with a great sum of money" is substantiated by similar complaints from the twelfth century on, though the language of the canon law makes it evident that Luther's other contention is also correct, viz., that the *pallium* was originally bestowed gratis. The sum required from the different archbishops varied with the wealth of their see, and was a fixed sum in each case.

⁵⁷ The oath of allegiance to the pope was required before the *pallium* could be bestowed. The canon law describes this oath as one "of allegiance, obedience and unity".

⁵⁸ See note 47 above.

⁵⁹ i.e., The benefices are treated as though they were vacant.

⁶⁰ In the case of certain endowed benefices the right to nominate the incumbent was vested in individuals, usually of the nobility, and was hereditary in their family.

⁶¹ *Commendation* was one of the practices by which the pope evaded the provision of the canon law which prescribed that the same man should not hold two livings with the cure of souls. The man who received an office *in commendam* was not required to fulfill the duties attached to the position, and when a living or an abbacy was granted in this way during the incumbency of another, the recipient received its entire income during a subsequent vacancy. The practice was most common in the case of abbeys.

⁶² A monk who deserted his monastery was known as an "apostate".

or six gulden a year and sits in the church all day selling pictures and images to the pilgrims, so that henceforth neither prayers nor masses are said there. If this were to be called destroying monasteries and abolishing the worship of God, then the pope would have to be called a destroyer of Christendom and an abolisher of God's worship, because this is his constant practice. That would be a hard saying at Rome, and so we must call it a *commend* or a "command to take charge" of the monastery. The pope can every year make *commends* out of four or more of these monasteries, a single one of which may have an income of more than six thousand gulden. This is the way the Romans increase the worship of God and preserve the monasteries. The Germans also are beginning to find it out.

Third, There are some benefices which they call *incompatibilia*,⁶³ and which, according to the ordinances of the canon law, cannot be held by one man at the same time, as for instance, two parishes, two bishoprics and the like. In these cases the Holy Roman See of Avarice evades the canon law by making "glosses",⁶⁴ called *unio* and *incorporatio*, i.e., by "incorporating" many *incompatibilia*, so that each becomes a part of every other and all of them together are looked upon as though they were one living. They are then no longer "incompatible", and the holy canon law is satisfied, in that it is no longer binding, except upon those who do not buy these "glosses"⁶⁵ from the pope or his *datarius*.⁶⁶ The *unio*, i.e., "uniting", is of the same nature. The pope binds many such benefices together like a bundle of sticks, and by virtue of this bond they are all regarded as one benefice. So there is at Rome one courtesan⁶⁷ who holds, for himself alone, 22 parishes, 7 priories and 44 canonries besides – all by the help of that masterly "gloss", which holds that this is not illegal. What cardinals and other prelates have, everyone may imagine for himself. In this way the Germans are to have their purses eased and their itch cured.

Another of the "glosses" is the *administratio*, i.e., a man may have, besides his bishopric, an abbacy or a dignity, and possess all the property which goes with it, only he has no other title than that of "administrator".⁶⁸ For at Rome it is sufficient that words are changed and not the things they stand for; as though I were to teach that a bawdy-house keeper should have the name of "burgomaster's wife", and yet continue to ply her trade. This kind of Roman rule St. Peter foretold when he said, in II Peter 2:3: "There shall come false teachers, who in covetousness, with feigned words, shall make merchandise of you, to get their gains."

Again, dear Roman Avarice has invented the custom of selling and bestowing livings to such advantage that the seller or disposer retains reversionary rights upon them: to wit, if the incumbent dies, the benefice freely reverts to him who previously sold, bestowed or surrendered it. In this way they have made livings hereditary property, so that henceforth no one can come into possession of them, except the man to whom the seller is willing to dispose of them, or to whom he bequeaths his rights at death. Besides, there are many who transfer to others the mere title to a benefice from which those who get the title derive not a mite of income. It is now an old custom, too, to give another man a benefice and to reserve a certain part out of the annual revenue.⁶⁹ In olden times this was simony.⁷⁰ Of these things there are so many more that they

⁶³ i.e., offices which cannot be united in the hands of one man.

⁶⁴ A gloss is a note explanatory of a word or passage of doubtful meaning. The glosses are the earliest form of commentary on the Bible. The glosses of the canon law are the more or less authoritative comments of the teachers, and date from the time when the study of the canon law became a part of the theological curriculum. Their aim is chiefly to show how the law applies to practical case which may arise. The so-called *glossa ordinaria* had in Luther's time an authority almost equal to that of the *corpus juris* itself.

⁶⁵ The thing which was bought was, of course, the dispensation, or permission to avail oneself of the gloss.

⁶⁶ *Dataria* is the name for that department of the curia which had to deal with the granting of dispensations and the disposal of benefices. *Datarius* is the title of the official who presided over this department.

⁶⁷ See footnote 53 above.

⁶⁸ So Albrecht of Mainz bore the title of "administrator" of Halberstadt.

⁶⁹ The complaint was made at Worms (1521) that it was impossible for a German to secure a clear title to a benefice at Rome unless he applied for it in the name of an Italian, to whom he was obliged to pay a percentage of the income, a yearly pension, or a fixed sum of money for the use of his name.

⁷⁰ Simony – the sin of Simon Magus (Acts 8:18-20) – the sin committed by the sale or the purchase of an office or position which is formally conferred by a ritual act of the Church. In the ancient and earlier medieval Church the use of money to secure preferment was held to invalidate the title of the guilty party to the position thus secured, and the acceptance of money for such a purpose was an offense punishable by deposition and degradation. The "heresy of Simon" was conceived to be the greatest of all heresies. The traffic in Church offices, which became a flagrant abuse from the time of John XXII (1316-1334), would have been regarded in earlier days as the most atrocious simony.

cannot all be counted. They treat livings more shamefully than the heathen beneath the cross treated the garments of Christ.

Yet all that has hitherto been said is ancient history and an every-day occurrence at Rome. Avarice has devised one thing more, which may, I hope, be his last morsel, and choke him. The pope has a noble little device called *pectoralis reservatio*, i.e., his “mental reservation”, and *proprius motus*, i.e., the “arbitrary will of his authority”. It goes like this. When one man has gotten a benefice at Rome, and the appointment has been regularly signed and sealed, according to custom, and there comes another, who brings money, or has laid the pope under obligation in some other way, of which we will not speak, and desires of the pope the same benefice, then the pope takes it from the first man and gives it to the second. If it is said that this is unjust, then the Most Holy Father must make some excuse, that he may not be reproved for doing such open violence to the law, and says that in his mind and heart he had reserved that benefice to himself and his own plenary disposal, although he had never before in his whole life either thought or heard of it. Thus he has now found a little “gloss” by which he can, in his own person, lie and deceive, and make a fool and an ape of anybody – all this he does brazenly and openly, and yet he wishes to be the head of Christendom, though with his open lies he lets the Evil Spirit rule him.

This arbitrary will and lying “reservation” of the pope creates in Rome a state of affairs which is unspeakable. There is buying, selling, bartering, trading, trafficking, lying, deceiving, robbing, stealing, luxury, harlotry, knavery, and every sort of contempt of God, and even the rule of Antichrist could not be more scandalous. Venice, Antwerp, Cairo⁷¹ are nothing compared to this fair which is held at Rome and the business which is done there, except that in those other places they still observe right and reason. At Rome everything goes as the devil wills, and out of this ocean a like virtue flows into all the world. Is it a wonder that such people fear a reformation and a free council, and prefer to set all kings and princes at enmity rather than have them unite and bring about a council? Who could bear to have such knavery exposed if it were his own?

Finally, for all this noble commerce the pope has built a warehouse, namely, the house of the *datarius*, in Rome. Thither all must come who deal after this fashion in benefices and livings. From him they must buy their “glosses” and get the power to practice such archknavery. In former times Rome was generous, and then justice had either to be bought or else suppressed with money, but now she has become exorbitant, and no one dare be a knave unless with a great sum he has first bought the right. If that is not a brothel above all the brothels one can imagine, then I do not know what brothel means.

If you have money in this house, then you can come by all the things I have said; and not only these, but all sorts of usury⁷² are here made honest, for a consideration, and the possession of all property acquired by theft or robbery is legalized. Here vows are dissolved; here monks are granted liberty to leave their orders; here marriage is on sale to the clergy; here bastards can become legitimate; here all dishonor and shame can come to honor; all ill repute and stigma of evil are here knighted and ennobled; here is permitted the marriage which is within the forbidden degrees or has some other defect.⁷³ Oh! what a taxing and a robbing rules there! It looks as though all the laws of the Church were made for one purpose only – to be nothing but so many money-snares, from which a man must extricate himself,⁷⁴ if he would be a Christian. Yea, here the devil becomes a saint, and a god to boot. What heaven and earth cannot, that this house can do! They call them *compositiones*!⁷⁵ “Compositions” indeed! rather “confusions”! Oh, what a modest tax is the Rhine-toll,⁷⁶ compared with the tribute taken by this holy house!

Let no one accuse me of exaggeration! It is all so open that even at Rome they must confess the evil to be greater and more terrible than any one can say. I have not yet stirred up the hell-broth of personal vices, nor do I intend to do so. I speak of things which are common talk, and yet I have not words to tell them all. The bishops, the priests and, above all, the doctors in the universities, who

⁷¹ The three chief centers of foreign commerce in the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries.

⁷² The Church law forbade the taking of interest on loans of money.

⁷³ During the Middle Ages all questions touching marriage and divorce, including, therefore, the question of the legitimacy of children, were governed by the laws of the Church, on the theory that marriage was a sacrament.

⁷⁴ i.e., by buying dispensations.

⁷⁵ The sums paid for special dispensations were so called.

⁷⁶ The toll which the “robber-barons” of the Rhine levied upon merchants passing through their domains.

draw their salaries for this purpose, should have done their duty and with common consent have written and cried out against these things; but they have done the very opposite.

There remains one last word, and I must say that too. Since boundless Avarice has not been satisfied with all these treasures, which three great kings might well think sufficient, he now begins to transfer this trade and sell it to Fugger of Augsburg,⁷⁷ so that the lending and trading and buying of bishoprics and benefices, and the driving of bargains in spiritual goods has now come to the right place, and spiritual and temporal goods have become one business. And now I would fain hear of a mind so lofty that it could imagine what this Roman Avarice might yet be able to do and has not already done; unless Fugger were to transfer or sell this combination of two lines of business to somebody else. I believe we have reached the limit.

As for what they have stolen in all lands and still steal and extort, by means of indulgences, bulls, letters of confession,⁷⁸ “butter-letters”⁷⁹ and other *confessionalia*⁸⁰ – all this I consider mere patch-work, and like casting a single devil more into hell. Not that they bring in little, for a mighty king could well support himself on their returns, but they are not to be compared with the streams of treasure above mentioned. I shall also say nothing at present of how this indulgence money has been applied. Another time I shall inquire about that, for Campofiore,⁸¹ and Belvidere⁸² and certain other places probably know something about it.

Since, then, such devilish rule is not only open robbery and deceit, and the tyranny of the gates of hell, but also ruins Christendom in body and soul, it is our duty to use all diligence in protecting Christendom against such misery and destruction. If we would fight the Turks, let us make a beginning here, where they are at their worst. If we justly hang thieves and behead robbers, why should we let Roman Avarice go free? For he is the greatest thief and robber that has come or can come into the world, and all in the holy Name of Christ and of St. Peter! Who can longer endure it or keep silence? Almost everything he owns has been gotten by theft and robbery; that is the truth, and all history shows it. The pope never got by purchase such great properties that from his *officia*⁸³ alone he can raise about a million ducats, not to mention the mines of treasure named above and the income of his lands. Nor did it come to him by inheritance from Christ or from St. Peter; no one ever loaned it or gave it to him; it has not become his by virtue of immemorial use and enjoyment. Tell me, then, whence he can have it? Learn from this what they have in mind when they send out legates to collect money for use against the Turks.

III PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

[This section, containing twenty-seven articles for reform, is omitted from the reading.]

Note on text: This translation appears in *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes*, Volume II (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), with one or two slight modifications in Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960 (Jafet: 230.41: L973t, pp. 9-111). The online version, which has been reformatted here and from which some footnotes have been removed, belongs to Project Wittenberg and is in the public domain (<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/nblty-01.html>).

⁷⁷ The Fuggers of Augsburg were the greatest of the German capitalists in the XVI Century. They were international bankers, “the Rothschilds of the sixteenth century”. Their control of large capital enabled them to advance large sums of money to the territorial rulers, who were in a chronic state of need. In return for these favors they received monopolistic concessions by which their capital was further increased. The spiritual, as well as the temporal lords, availed themselves regularly of the services of this accommodating firm. They were the pope’s financial representatives in Germany.

⁷⁸ Certificates entitling the holder to choose his own confessor and authorizing the confessor to absolve him from certain classes of “reserved” sins, referred to in the Ninety-five Theses [of Luther, 1517] as *confessionalia*.

⁷⁹ Certificates granting their possessor permission to eat milk, eggs, butter and cheese on fast days.

⁸⁰ The word is used here in the broad sense, and means dispensations of all sorts, including those just mentioned, relating to penance.

⁸¹ The Campo di Fiore, a Roman market-place, restored and adorned at great expense by Eugenius IV (1431-1447), and his successors.

⁸² A part of the Vatican palace notorious as the banqueting-hall of Alexander VI (1492-1503), turned by Julius II (1503-1513) into a museum for the housing of his wonderful and expensive collection of ancient works of art. Luther is hinting that the indulgence money has been spent on these objects rather than on the maintenance of the Church.

⁸³ .i.e., the offices and positions in Rome which were for sale.